DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 099 TM 850 419

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TITLE Peer Evaluation: An Interview Study of Teachers Evaluating Teachers.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 22p ; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (69th, Chicago, IL, March 31-April 4, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; Elementary Secondary Education; Interviews; Participant Satisfaction; *Peer Evaluation; Program Effectiveness; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Dismissal; Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Evaluation; *Teacher Improvement; Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Performance Assistance Program; *Salt Lake City School District UT

ABSTRACT

The Salt Lake City School District (SLCSD) teacher evaluation system, which includes peer review and assistance for deficient teachers, was instituted in 1975. The Performance Assistance program provides for strong, experienced teachers (peer reviewers) to work with teachers identified by their principals as deficient. This study addresses the experiences of peer reviewers who participated in the SLCSD review process. Teacher interviews were used to investigate the functioning of a district-wide peer evaluation system used for summative evaluation and possible teacher dismissal. Peer evaluators were questioned about the personal dimensions of being a reviewer and the impact of the peer review process on professional relationships. Major findings of the study were a high level of acceptance of the peer review process, the high perceived positive professional benefits resulting from serving as a peer evaluator and the logistical problems involved in frequent absences from the peer evaluator's own classroom. The 25 interview questions are appended. (Author/DWH)

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Peer Evaluation:

An Interview Study of Teachers Evaluating Teachers

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Paper presented at American Educational Research Association, Chicago, 1985.

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ABSTRACT

Teacher interviews were used to investigate the functioning of a district-wide peer evaluation system used for summative evaluation and possible teacher dismissal. Thirty-nine peer evaluators were questioned about the personal dimensions of being a reviewer and the impact of the peer review process on professional relationships. Major findings of the study were a high level of acceptance of the peer review process, the high perceived positive professional benefits resulting from serving as a peer evaluator and the logistical problems involved in frequent absences from the peer evaluator's own classroom.

Introduction

Increased national interest in teacher evaluation underscores the need for increased understanding of the process itself and teachers' participation in the process. In a recent study of teacher incentive plans researchers found two variables critical to the success of these systems: teacher participation in the planning, and involvement in the implementation of these systems (Hatry & Greiner, 1984).

While teacher evaluation is a topic of great current importance on local and national educational scenes, relatively little research on the topic has been done (Peterson, 1984; Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin, Bernstein, 1984). Few methods or models use peer review; where this has occurrred, it is mainly confined to higher education (French-Lazovik, 1981). This trend away from the use of peers as evaluators is especially pronounced in systems where the evaluation has summative versus formative consequences.

In a previous study of teachers' attitudes towards teacher evaluation researchers found resistance to the use of peers as evaluators (Kauchak, Peterson & Driscoll, 1983). This resistance centered around two areas: the disruption of professional relationships and the difficulties involved in evaluating what teachers felt to be a highly personal and idiosyncratic enterprise.

Since 1975 the Salt Lake City School District (SLCSD) has had a unique teacher evaluation system which includes peer review and assistance for deficient teachers. In this system, previously called Peer Remediation

but presently called Performance Assistance, strong, experienced teachers (peer reviewers) work with teachers identified as deficient by their principals. The process has been used with approximately 70 teachers, with 37 ultimately leaving the system, either voluntarily or by not having their contracts renewed.

The present study addressed the experiences of peer reviewers who participated in the SLCSD review process. The study addressed perceptions of the effectiveness of the process, dimensions of teacher stress by participant reviewers, and ways in which the process affected professional relationships within the system.

The Performance Assistance System

Salt Lake City is an urban district enrolling 25,000 students with 1,100 teachers. There are four high schools, five intermediate schools and 27 elementary schools (Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin, Bernstein, 1984. The city is home to the largest state-supported university, a small private college and a growing technical school.

Performance Assistance is a multi-level process that begins with the Accountability Plan. According to a written agreement between the superintendent and the teachers' organization, every teacher is to confer with his/her principal to complete the district's Accountability Plan. This plan includes supporting goals and objectives established by the Board of Education and the individual school (individual teacher goals are now optional). The district and the teachers' association have developed a list of teaching expectations as a standard to judge the accomplishment of those goals. The stated position of both the superintendent and the association is that "persons not suited to the educational setting should

not be employed by the school district" (Written Agreement, 1983, Article 10.11.1, p. 30).

Should the principal determine that a teacher is not meeting the goals of the plan or for some reason is in need of assistance, Informal Performance Assistance is the second step. (Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin, Bernstein, 1984; Written Agreement 1983). The teacher must be informed of deficiencies orally as well as in writing, and may request a representative of the SLTA during conferences. Recommendations for improvement must be given, and assistance may be received from the central office to achieve the recommendations. If the person achieves the recommendations the process ends. During the informal stage, nothing about the process appears in the individual's personnel file.

For those not meeting performance goals, the third step is Formal Remediation. The decision to use this last step is left solely to the principal. (Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin, Bernstein, 1984). Once the proper forms are filed with the central office, the team, usually four people, is formed. The superintendent assigns a learning specialist, from the central district office who is in charge of the team and acts as coordinator. The teacher's principal is automatically on the team. The other half of the team is appointed by the SLTA; one is an Association coordinator to guarantee due process the other is a grade/subject specific assisting teacher.

The activities of the team are not specifically outlined. Teams are allowed to find the best method(s) suitable to each particular situation. They often engage in some form of independent fact-finding, and may observe or even work with the teacher. A plan for improvement is then formulated

by the team and the teacher. The district provides for other skilled teachers, on leave or retired, to be hired for a few weeks to work with the teacher, at the discretion of the team.

A plan for performance assistance is developed cooperatively with the teacher and the team, and includes periodic reviews. The first occurs two months after this plan is put into effect. The team has the option at that time to terminate proceedings, if Performance Assistance has been successful, or to continue for an additional three months if not. At the end of five months, if the team and the principal determine the process is still not successful, the end result is either termination or reassignment. Any time during that five months, if satisfactory performance is achieved, the team can terminate the process. Records are destroyed for those achieving success (Written Agreement, 1983, p. 32).

Originally the team members reached consensus regarding the outcome of the procedure. Each member had one vote. Principals and administrators could not arbitrarly thwart the wishes of the team teachers, and the teachers could not out-number the administrators. Recently, the teachers' association has requested that principals make the final evaluative decision based on the principal's observations as well as the team's recommendations (Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin, Bernstein, 1984).

In this district, teachers are assumed to be competent until, or unless, they come to the attention of their principal. During the nine years since implementation, 70 teachers have gone through the formal step of the process. Some have been subjected to formal termination proceedings while others have resigned. Exact numbers in each category is privileged information. Thirty-three have been judged successfully remediated and

returned to classroom service (Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin, Bernstein, 1984).

Design

The data for this study were collected through content analysis of interviews with teachers. The interview consisted of twenty-five questions, of which four were informational, seeking demographic data, and twenty-one were open-ended. Of the latter, ten dealt with the functioning of the system, six with personal dimensions of being a reviewer and five with the impact of the peer review process on professional relationships. All interview questions were supplemented with structured probe questions to elicit elaborated responses (See Appendix A).

The Salt Lake Teachers Association assisted in the preparation of the interview protocol. Prior to the finalization of the questionnaire, names of four individuals who had experienced the process as peer assistors were provided by the SLTA. Three consented to an interview and critique of the questionnaire; arrangements with the fourth were not possible. Suggestions were given and appropriate modifications made.

Subjects

The district cooperated by supplying names of teachers who had served on the Performance Assistance Teams from 1979 through 1984. The pool was comprised of forty-one names provided by the administrator responsible for the system. One person no longer worked for the district, could not be located and was dropped from the study. The 40 remaining teachers were contacted by letter which briefly described the study and sought their cooperation. A letter of support from the SLTA was also included. The pool was divided into two parts with the second group receiving their

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letters about two weeks after the first, so that the time lag between receiving the letter and personal contact would be shortened (Warwick and Lininger, 1975). Shortly after receiving the letter, each teacher was contacted by telephone to inquire if they would assist in the study, and to set up an appointment for the interview. One teacher declined to participate unless compensated for the time involved and was eliminated from the study. Total remaining participants in the study were 39.

During the intial telephone contact, a few potential participants expressed reluctance to participate because their experience had been what they described as "negative" or "not a good one." They volunteered that the teacher they had worked with had been terminated, voluntarily quit or had chosen early retirement. They expressed the opinion that probably only positive or "success" cases were wanted. They were reassured that the disposition of all cases was unknown, and data on all cases for the last several years, regardless or outcome, was being sought. With that reassurance, the total 39 agreed to participate.

Teaching experience of the subjects ranged from 6 years to 31 years with the mean being 17.5 years of experience. During the interviews, it was discovered that not all of the subjects were teachers. Social workers, central office (administrative) staff as well as principals had also worked on the Peer Assistance Teams and had been included in our pool. There were 14 males and 25 females, 19 of the teachers were elementary teachers, 11 were secondary, 7 had teaching experience at both levels, and two were social workers in the sytem.

All had been teachers at the time of their service to the team with the exception of the social workers. The administrators interviewed in

this study became administrators after their participation on the team. Although the principal of the teacher undergoing assistance is automatically on the team, our study was of the peers and not the administrators. These few administrators were included because they had not been administrators at the time of their involvement with the team. The data of the social workers, central office staff and administrators were analyzed and included because of the depth added to the study.

It was also discovered that some of the people had served on more than one team. Data were collected on more than one case in some instances. In others, there was not sufficient interview time for more than one case. Some of the details of those involved in multiple cases indicated they were pre-1979, and were included because of the additional information they added to the study.

Procedures

Interviews, all conducted by the same interviewer, were at the respondent's schools, with three exceptions. For teacher convenience, one was conducted in an isolated area of the public library, one at the district office and one on the University of Utah campus. Most were held in the teachers' classrooms either before or after school or while students were involved with others somewhere else in the building. Teachers' answers were prompt, articulate and thoughtful, indicating they had undergone a certain amount of reflection and contemplation on their own about the experience prior to the interview. As each interview was conducted, it was assigned a chronological number which was also recorded on a master list.

Subjects were informed in the letter that an audio tape recording

with brief written notes of the interview was desired. Only one expressed reluctance to being taped. When informed that extensive notes would then be necessary, requiring longer interview time, the person then preferred the audio tape. Within moments of beginning the interview, it appeared the subject was at ease and engrossed in the interview. The tape recorder did not appear to be a barrier.

Data Analysis

The taped interviews were collected and analyzed by the principal investigator. Tapes were then edited and coded in three stages. First each question was examined for different types of responses. From this preliminary analysis categories were formed and the questions reanalyzed. Following the categorization of different types of teacher responses each question was summarized and modal responses identified.

This paper focuses on the six questions dealing with the personal dimensions of being a reviewer and the five that dealt with the impact of the peer review process on professional relationships. Those readers interested in the data contained in the other fourteen questions which deal with the functioning of the system as a whole are referred to Benzley (1985).

Results

The results of this study are presented in three sections. In the first, problems encountered by peer reviewers in the system are discussed. In the second section the effects of peer participation on interpersonal and professional relationships are investigated. In the third section participants' reactions to the total system from a personal/professional perspective are analyzed.

Problems Encountered

Two questions in the interview focused specifically on problems encountered by peer evaluators. The first, "What were your concerns about leaving your classroom for your performance assistance activities?" brought the following responses. A minority of the peer evaluators interviewed (12 or 31 percent) expressed no concerns about leaving their classrooms. Of these, four mentioned having good aides or substitutes, three were active in teachers' organization and had worked logistical problems out previously, while two worked in flexible programs where aides, volunteers or coworkers could easily cover for a short period.

The majority of the teachers, however, were concerned about their extended absences from their classrooms. Twenty-three of the respondents (59%) expressed professional concern over their absence from the classroom; of these, fourteen spontaneously mentioned problems with substitute teachers. One teacher's comments are typical of this group.

> I would have the ball rolling . . . and then the substitute would come in. And I was very concerned about the quality of the substitutes. I did not have (one) that was real reliable, that I could just call one person each time . . . I was very concerned about the

> quality of the people that I had come in. And a lot of people are not interested in working half a day, so your good substitutes, quote-unquote, would not come for a half a day.

Because of the time spent away from their own classroom, the quality of the substitute was seen as a definite variable which influenced the quality of the peer evaluation experience.

Time was also mentioned as a problem in response to the following question, "What were the difficulties in the process that you did not expect when you agreed to participate?" Time was the modal response to this question, being spontaneously mentioned by ten of the interviewees. Here the problem described was not so much time spent away from the classroom but rather the amount of time and energy required by the process. One teacher described the problem in this way. "I didn't realize the amount of time I felt I had to give in order to be fair."

The other most common response to this question related to the judgmental nature of the process. Eight of the teachers mentioned how difficult it was emotionally and professionally to judge a peer. One said,

> . . . and you think . . . your decision might depend on whether they might have a job or not . . . it's very difficult. You want to do the best you can to help them, but you also realize that kids can't have a teacher that is ineffective. You're kind of torn, wanting to help both groups and sometimes you can't.

This professional ambivalence towards the judgmental aspects of the process will be returned to later.

Other problems mentioned in response to this question were team problems (6 respondents), administrative problems (5 respondents) and teacher problems (5 respondents). Team problems related to group and interpersonal problems and how the four members functioned as a team. Administrative problems involved interpersonal problems between the teacher

being assisted and the principal. Teacher problems all had the same theme: the teacher being assisted was unwilling to accept the fact that there were problems with his teaching.

Peer Evaluation and Professional Relationships

To investigate the effect of the peer review process on professional relationships, the teachers in our sample were asked if their, " . . . fellow teachers were aware that the teacher was assisting in this program?", and "What was their reaction?" Sixteen responded "yes" to this question, four responded "some" and six responded "a few"; combining these gives a total of 26 or 67% of the teacher involved. From these figures it appears that the peer evaluators neither made an effort to publicize their involvement nor hide it. Comments from those who didn't think others were aware offer additional insight. These comments included "tried not to advertise," "nobody's business" and "no big deal - it's handled quietly."

In response to the follow-up question, "What was their reaction?", six of the twenty-six mentioned a positive reaction, eleven a neutral reaction and one a negative reaction. Comments classified as positive included statements of support or concern for either the assisting teacher or the one undergoing the process. Neutral questions included queries about the process such as "How does it work?", "Does it work?", and "Is it hard or painful?" The one negative reaction focused on a situation in which the teacher being reviewed had served as a substitute in the district and the teachers who had made these comments were skeptical of the teacher's performance on a regular basis.

Another aspect of the effect of the peer evaluation process on pro-

fessional relationships in a district are the reactions of the co-workers of the teacher being assisted. To investigate this the peer evaluators were asked, "Were the fellow teachers of the assisted teacher aware of his or her participation in the program?" and "What was their reaction?" Thirty-one teachers answered yes to this question and 3 responded "probably" or "suspected so."

An analysis of the follow-up question which asked about co-worker reactions revealed that in thirteen instances the reaction was not known, suggesting that the assistance program was basically a quiet, private process. Of the remaining responses, eight peer evaluators reported co-workers being supportive of the teacher, seven reported non-support due to poor faculty relationships between the teacher being assisted and co-workers, five teachers reported a mixed reaction with both support and non-support for the teacher and four reported a neutral reaction by the co-workers. If the neutral, mixed and negative reactions were combined, these constituted 16 or 67% of the known reactions. It appears that the problems that led to the remediation process were either known by fellow workers or in some way influenced relationships with co-workers. Unfortunately, the numbers of co-workers involved and consequently the data base for this conclusion are not known.

Peer Evaluators Evaluate the Process

In the third and final section of the findings we focused on participants' reactions to the adequacy of the system. Included here were questions of fairness, whether participants would do it again and whether the process has helped the district as well as the participants.

When peer evaluators were asked to comment on the fairness of the

process, 33 judged the process to be fair, while only one judged it to be unfair, with five respondents giving either qualified or indirect responses. Responses under the fair category included "more than adequate", "really fair but blunt" and "fair as anything I can think of." The lone not fair judgment involved a case which ended in termination in which the peer evaluator felt that there was animosity between the principal and the teacher.

When participants were asked if they would be willing to serve again, thirty three responded "yes", four "maybe", a one "don't know," and only one "no." The lone "no" respondent explained his decision in this way, "I don't like judging one of my own peers. Somebody's got to do it. . . I think it really is a good process for certain reasons, but personally, I just don't want to do that again." Positive reactions to the process ranged from "interesting" to "something that someone has to do."

We also asked teachers if the idea of peer involvement in teacher evaluation could be broadened to include all teachers. Twenty-six of the thirty-nine teachers answered affirmatively and their reasons ranged from the need for teachers to self-improve, to broadening the evaluation data base beyond the principal visit. Negative responses, which numbered five, focused on logistical problems as well as the concept of peer evaluation itself for all teachers.

When asked how their involvement in the process benefitted themselves, the most common response (17) was self reflection on their teaching. One teacher described this affect in this way "I think every teacher should do this just for the fact that it stimulates your teaching much more, and makes you much more aware of the way you teach." In this regard nine

participants also saw the process as a way to improve their own teaching and as a source of ideas. Other benefits mentioned were increased involvement with other people (9), increased knowledge of the process itself (7) and a broader perspective on teaching and the profession (6).

Teachers were also asked how the process has helped the district. Teachers often cited several benefits, the most common (22) being a general help to the profession. Other benefits mentioned were the removal of poor teachers (20), the provision of a more democractic process, and the providing of a tool to help teachers solve their own problems.

Teachers were less clear about the direct instructional effects of the process to the district. When asked if the process had improved teaching in the district, nineteen said "yes", ten said "hope so," and two had mixed assessments, six said they didn't know and one each said "doubt it" and "no." Teachers who answered affirmatively saw the focus of improvement more at the individual rather than the school or district level. The mixed responses indicated the process worked in specific cases but didn't know if the consequences generalized; this latter position was also voiced by the six who said they didn't know.

In the final question in this sequence, participants were asked if the process affected morale in the district. Thirteen respondents answered affirmatively, and four of these mentioned that this positive effect came as a result of exposure to the system. Seven responded that the process had had a mixed effect on district morale and concluded that the effect depended on people's perception of whether the process was fair or not. Six people responded negatively and felt that the process intimidated teachers who were insecure regarding their abilities and strengths. Eight

respondents didn't know and four felt that the process hadn't affected morale.

Conclusions

The major finding from this study is the high level of teacher acceptance of the peer review process. When asked if the process was fair, eighty-five percent (33) of the peer evaluators said yes, with only one of the thirty-nine saying the process was unfair. In addition, when asked if they would participate again, eighty-five percent said yes, with only one saying that they would not. A final measure of teacher acceptance of the process is teachers' perceptions of whether the peer evaluation process could be broadened to include all teachers in the district; twenty-six teachers or sixty-seven percent of the sample said yes.

This high level of teacher acceptance of the peer review process runs counter to previous research on teachers' attitudes toward peer evaluation (Kauchak, Peterson & Driscoll, 1983) and current practice in the area (Millman, 1981). Previous research on teacher acceptance of peer evaluation found positive attitudes toward the formative use of peer evaluation but reservations about the negative effects of summative peer evaluation on professional relationships.

Two possible explanations for this high level of acceptance relate to the organizational context in which this process operates and the way that it is implemented. In their study of effective teacher evaluation practices, Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin and Bernstein (1984) emphasized the importance of the total organizational context in which teacher evaluation occurs. In the Salt Lake District, heavy emphasis has been placed on the idea of shared governance in which the Salt Lake Teachers Association

has been given the opportunity, and has accepted, the responsibility for teacher evaluation, which is typically seen as an administrative responsibility. Significant here is researchers' findings that teacher involvement in the design and implementation of the educational system was highly correlated with teachers' acceptance of that system (Hatry & Greiner, 1984; Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin, Bernstein, 1984). Whether peer evaluation would receive such high levels of acceptance in other, less compatible settings is an empirical question.

Another factor which may account for the high level of acceptance is the fact that the peer reviewers are almost always drawn from other schools, thus minimizing the possibility of disruptions or professional peer relationships, a problem mentioned by teachers in a previous study (Kauchak, Peterson & Driscoll, 1984). The fact that the Salt Lake District is a relatively large district with thirty-six schools, allows this to happen. Whether a similar system could operate in a smaller city or in a smaller district is also open to question.

The other major finding from this study are teachers' perceptions of the indirect benefits gained from participation as a peer evaluator. These perceived benefits ranged from self-reflection to increased involvement with other professionals, a source of ideas and a means to improve their own teaching, and a broader perspective on teaching and the profession. Given Lortie's (L974) findings that teaching is basically an isolated enterprise with few opportunities for built-in professional growth, these unanticipated benefits appear to be a major positive outcome of this process.

Finally, on a practical note, the finding that locating qualified substitute teachers is a major problem encountered by peer evaluators

is an important consideration for districts contemplating the implementation of a peer evaluation system. The quality of these substitutes appears to be a major concern of teacher participants.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. (Record sex of interviewee).

2. How many years have you taught?

3. What grade level (and subject [if high school]) do you teach?

4. Briefly describe the teacher you assisted: sex, experience, grade level, different or same school, subject.

5. How long did the process, take, in weeks or days?

6. In two or three brief sentences, how good was the Performance Assistance Program, in your experience?

7. Did the program have enough staff, materials, time, and other resources?

8. Were you given specific information about the teacher's problems? If so, who identified them? How accurate was this information?

9. How did you gather information about the teacher? Was it a good approach?

10. How much time did you spend in the teacher's classroom?

11. What were your concerns about leaving your classroom for you Performance Assistance activities?

12. Briefly describe the crucial problems of the teacher you assisted. To what extend was classroom discipline a problem for your teacher?

13. Were non-classroom factors, such as age, personality, personal style, a part of the teacher's problems?

14. Were your fellow teachers aware that you were assisting in the program? What was their reaction?

15. Were the fellow teachers of the assisted teacher aware of their participation in the program? What was their reaction?

16. How did the teacher you assisted react to your help, suggestions, and other activities?

17. How specifically did you deal with anxiety, anger, or resistance?

18. What were the difficulties in the process that you did not expect when you agreed to participate.

19. Comment on the fairness of the review process.

20. If a consensus by the committee was reached, was it upheld by the principal?

21. Would you be willing to serve on another review process?

22. Could the idea of peer involvement in teacher evaluation be broadened to include all teachers? In what ways?

23. In what ways did your participation benefit you?

24. In what ways has the program helped the entire District? Has it improved teaching? Has it affected morale?

25. In what ways could the Peer Assistance program be improved?